UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KOLKATA 000148

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SUBJECT: WEST BENGAL LOCAL ELECTIONS INCLUDE CONTROVERSY AND
VIOLENCE

REF: A)KOLKATA 66 B) KOLKATA 141

¶1. (U) Summary: On May 11, the first phase of panchayat (local
village) polls took place in five districts of southern West
Bengal. Violence and controversy in Nandigram dominated the
day's events. Local Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM)
Member of Parliament (MP) Lakshman Seth attempted to limit the
security efforts of Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) Deputy
Inspector General Alok Raj, who told the media that the
Government of West Bengal (GOWB) had given him written
instructions to keep CRPF personnel away from trouble-prone
areas on election day. In Purulia, on the border of Jharkhand
state, Maoist insurgents -- who had called for a poll boycott --
triggered a land mine blast killing a Border Security Force
(BSF) soldier and injuring 11 others. End summary.

¶2. (U) On May 11, the first phase of panchayat polls took place
in five south Bengal districts -- East Midnapore, West
Midnapore, Burdwan, Bankura and Purulia.   Although the State
Election Commission and Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee
characterized the elections as largely "peaceful," there were
reports of sporadic violence between rival political parties,
stealing of blank ballots, and intimidation by the CPM
supporters. Voter turnout in the districts averaged 55 percent.

¶3. (U) Controversies and confrontations in Nandigram dominated
the day's events. Since early 2007, Nandigram has witnessed
turbulence with locals violently opposing the CPM-led state
government's land acquisition for industry and the CPM cadres'
vengeful repression of villagers (reftel A). On March 14, 2007,
state police killed 14 Nandigram villagers. In November 2007,
CPM musclemen forcefully "recaptured" Nandigram from defiant
villagers who were compelled to surrender. CRPF was called in
subsequently to maintain peace in the area. On polling day,
local MP and CPM strongman Lakshman Seth ordered the Deputy
Inspector General of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF)
Alok Raj to stay inside the CRPF camp in Nandigram.   Raj's
telephone conversation with Seth - in which he defied Seth's
orders - was witnessed and recorded by local media and was
telecast nationwide when Raj put his cell phone on speaker mode.
 Raj and the CRPF disregarded Seth's orders and continued
patrolling the area. Later, a female CPM supporter told members
of the press she had been molested by Raj and filed a formal
complaint with the police. Raj said he would welcome an
independent inquiry into any allegations against him. (Note:
Most of the CPM's partners in the Left Front, as well as
opposition parties, condemned Seth's interference in CRPF's
security duties. However, CPM Central Committee member and MP
Shyamal Chakrabarty defended Seth, saying he did the right thing
by "discussing" patrolling arrangements with Raj. End Note.)

¶4. (U) Raj subsequently revealed to the media that on May 9 the GOWB had given him written instructions to keep the CRPF away from trouble-prone areas. Raj said the May 9 order contravened "standard operating procedure" and the "area of domination" agreement signed between West Bengal's Director General of Police and the CRPF in November 2007 when the CRPF first arrived in Nandigram. According to election rules, the CRPF can patrol in all areas other than around the polling booths. Raj claimed he asked the district magistrate to intervene and consulted his superior officers on appropriate action. He was instructed to patrol Nandigram Block-I and not enter polling premises during the panchayat polls. The Union Home Ministry has asked for reports from the GOWB and the CRPF on the telephone conversation between Raj and Seth.

¶5. (U) In addition to the CRPF issue, several incidents of fake ballots, violence, and intimidation were reported in the Nandigram area. For example, CPM supporters threw stones at CRPF women personnel on duty at Garupara. Reportedly the CPM attackers had the support of the Officer in Charge of Nandigram's police station Debashis Chakraborty. Local media reported that some armed CPM activists took over a polling station in Jalpai and cast false votes, fleeing when the CRPF reached the area. There were also reports of CPM supporters using guns to threaten voters at Bhangabera, where a CPM candidate wanted by police in a murder case, Naba Samanta, was running for office.

¶6. (U) Election-related violence was not limited to Nandigram. In the Purulia district, on the border of Jharkhand state, Maoist insurgents set off a land mine killing a Border Security Force (BSF) soldier and injuring 11 others at Sirka village near Bandwan. The BSF vehicle was destroyed as soldiers escorting

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polling officials were returning to Bandwan after poll duty. The area was immediately cordoned off and Jharkhand police were informed about the blast. (Note: Maoists had called for a boycott of polls in Purulia and in the first week of May had killed two local CPM leaders there. End Note.)

¶7. (U) Comment: The CPM's formidable network in rural West Bengal enables it to influence and intimidate voters despite the presence of GOI security forces. Local leaders like Seth wield overwhelming authority on the ground, often controlling the local police and have the capacity to foment violence when/if necessary for the party's benefit. The panchayat elections are officially run by the State Election Commission -- headed by a retired state bureaucrat - but the real power lies with the CPM machinery.
JARDINE